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ABSTRACT

Recognizing that the selections traditionally studied in American literature survey courses do not constitute a sacrosanct body of material is the first step in reorganizing these courses to include black literature--a whole new kind of literature with an increasing amount of specialized criticism. In order to integrate black literature into courses, it will be necessary to eliminate some of the selections previously included. However, the benefits would be many: predominately white classes would be exposed to black literature, counteracting the sense of vacuum attendant on study in a specialized ethnic course; the themes of white writers would become less removed from everyday life when counterpointed by a new, vital, and less academic literature; classes would study the most American of all writing; and students' assumptions that the melting pot mystique is still viable would be dislodged. (JM)

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The Canon of American Literature: Cramming It All In

The title of this paper resulted directly from a number of discussions which took place at the 1973 MMLA Convention whose subject of concern was "Lost Literature." In those discussions, the word "canon" was used as an economical description of the literature which is the subject of the standard offerings of an English or Modern Language Department-- and last year the focus of the debates was the question of what one does with the literature once "lost," now "found" and/or given "new relevance." The participants in such discussions expressed a certain amount of dismay at the problems inherent in integrating, or deciding whether to integrate, the discovered literature into the teaching syllabi of their various disciplines, especially given the rather traditional course divisions of universities and colleges.

The meeting last November offered no real resolution of the problem; nor, probably, was it the aim of the convention to do so. But the dilemma remains a real one and there is perhaps no better illustration of the need to at least wrestle with the problem than the situation of the teacher of American Literature. Having had, for years, a fairly established set of material to pick and choose from for any given semester's syllabus-- the material called, with tongue-in-cheek, the "canon"--the professor of American literature and especially the teacher of the undergraduate survey course has recently had to come to grips with a sudden expansion of his potential teaching material. His attendance at last year's convention, for instance, brought him face to face with the necessity of "Enlarging the Context (to include Minority literature)," and of finding "A New Place For H. D.," and of "Teaching American Indian Literature," and of examining "A Feminist Approach to Women Poets"-- to mention just a few of the concerns of that meeting. The most striking demonstration of the need for a reassessment of the "canon," however, occurs with the teacher's confrontation with the realm of black literature.

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Within the past five years, the legitimacy of the black literature course has become unassailable. Not only has black literature been "found," it has received the clearest mark of respectibility with the construction of its own "canon"; and, as can be witnessed by the titles of the other papers in this forum, people are busily projecting future directions for black literature programs in universities and colleges. The question that the teacher of American literature is faced with, however, is not the one of this forum's title; his concern is not with "where is it going?"-- his dilemma centers on "what do we do with it now that it's here?"

It boils down to a question of practicality on the one hand and a question of philosophy on the other. Those who teach American literature survey courses must decide what to sacrifice out of an already over-crowded syllabus to make room for the inclusion of brand new material-- in this case, the black writers of the political scene (Washington and DuBois) and the literary realm (The Harlem Renaissance) to name just a few of the possible choices. And, at the same time, they must also decide philosophically on the merits of either inclusion or exclusion of such material.

In a way, these are certainly not new or unfamiliar decisions. Basically they are the same kind of questions teachers always must face when confronted with a new textbook, for instance, or the desire to give a different emphasis to a particular course; teachers are used to making the weighty decisions of dropping Howells to allow room for Wharton or consigning Fitzgerald to oblivion in favor of Porter, or whatever. But the problem of integrating a whole new kind of literature--especially one with an increasing body of specialized criticism attached-- into the "canon" poses a whole new set of considerations.

Indeed, the idea of the "canon" itself must be examined in a different light. It must be acknowledged, for instance, that though academics may use the word "canon" as shorthand for "traditional literature," they do it advisedly; they know that there is nothing sacrosanct about the body of material considered important at any given time. One needs only to consider the amount of textbook space devoted to

Sandburg twenty years ago or the lack of attention paid to Melville sixty years ago to know that. Teachers don't really believe that there exists some kind of pedagogical imprimatur for any of the writers who make up a term's syllabus: indeed, a review of the textbooks of the past several decades would show how flexible the "canon" is.

Examining representative textbooks is, in fact, one way of getting at the special problem confronting today's American literature teacher. And it becomes clear that the question of what to do about black literature is a fairly recent one; ten or fewer years ago, the question would have been mere academic speculation. For instance, one textbook, so well-loved by teachers as to be a "standard" for American literature courses, was up-dated as recently as 1967--and it includes one black writer, LeRoi Jones, and two of his poems. This same anthology is admirable in its presentation of the essential white writers, but it gives no due, nor even lip-service, to the reality of black writing in American literature. Such a textbook is perhaps an extreme example of the longevity of the myth of the whiteness of our heritage, but it is not hard to find others of a similar editorial persuasion. The novelty of the black literature question is demonstrated by another textbook. A brand new publication (1973) intended for the survey market displays such a wealth of extra-canon material that one is led to suspect that it seeks to obliterate by sheer weight the sins of omission of the past. This anthology includes not only the white writers of the established tradition, but also most of the important black writers and extensive selections from folk songs. Negro spirituals, the blues, extra-literary essays, and criticism. Such an all-inclusive "survey" ends up in the form of two volumes, each three thousand pages long and with the heft and dimension of a family Bible.

If the publisher's response to the question is any gauge of current feeling, then, there has been a shift, albeit recent, in the parameters of the canon, and the teacher-- who is tied in a very real un-ivory-towerish way to the textbook market--

must come to terms with the way that the canon seems to be reassessing itself. Still, to let the market place decree the answer to the problem is not really the way to resolve the problem. Merely because one publisher has provided some three thousand pages of material doesn't mean that any one semester or term can cover that material nor does it indicate that the course should cover that much or that kind of material. The decision inevitably devolves on the individual professor. As it should.

Perhaps, though, the question of whether to integrate black literature into the American literature survey syllabus is as academic as it was ten years ago, though the premises have been reversed. Certainly there exists a current purview which looks askance at the professor who refuses to consider the inclusion of black material into his course. And yet, he may well have some justice on his side. If he, for instance, feels that the goal of the survey course is the delineation of the mainstream of American literary thought, he may judge that the omission of a specific James short story to allow room for the inclusion of the Harlem Renaissance is not worth the sacrifice. He could argue that, by and large, the tradition of American literature is male and middle class and white and that prejudice plays no part in his decision because of the hermetic quality of a good deal of the black writing extant. To excoriate such a teacher for that belief constitutes a kind of band-wagonish reverse prejudice of its own. Indeed, the philosophy of survey courses has, in the past, almost demanded a "mainstream" approach to the material and perhaps the real need is to examine and reassess the role of the survey course itself before beginning to grapple with the difficulty of making practical adjustments in the syllabus.

For a number of years now, when American literature survey courses have been taught on the under graduate level, they were designed as requisite courses for English majors and for those students who wished to graduate with certification for teaching. For that reason, survey courses have been conceived of as chronological over-views; teachers begin with the Puritans and decade by decade cover the significant writers of the tradition attempting to give to prospective teachers a sense of the literary movements and influences on a grand panoramic scale so that the students can, in turn,

teach literature themselves. Clearly, though, college and university teachers can no longer view their role as being the trainers of future teachers; the very competition for jobs within their own milieu forces that acknowledgement. One could argue, therefore, that the traditional undergraduate survey course should be eliminated altogether and that probably the teaching of literary trends, essentially an academic approach, should be offered on the graduate level where the audience is already specialized and educated enough to see and enjoy the complexities of critical interaction. In that light, the professor who insisted on an exclusive "mainstream" approach could conceivebly even find it unnecessary to justify himself; his audience would provide the excuse. In turn, the undergraduate could be offered American literature courses which deal with material as demonstration of themes or genres

But, granting that most colleges and universities are fairly firmly fixed (or are bureaucratically immoveable) in the their curricula, it is essential that the teachers themselves review the goals of their courses. Increasingly, survey course have become "special," not because they are part of teacher training, but because they may provide the only exposure a non-English major will have to the heritage of American literature. Hence, to imply by omission that the literature of America is purely white does an injustice to both the student and the subject itself. Philosophically, then, the teacher must come to terms with the necessity of integrating, somehow, black literature into the "canon." And if this means, to use a previous example, eliminating a favorite James story to allow room in the syllabus to do it, the benefits must be seen to outweight the loss.

The benefits are multifold. Exposing what are still, in most universities, predominantly white classes to black literature within the context of an American literature syllabus tends to counteract the sense of vacuum which can afflict any specialized or ethnic course of study. And, in turn, the themes of white writers become to the students far less removed from everyday life--far less rarified--when they are counter-

pointed by a literature which is new to them and therefore somehow more vital and less academic. The syllabus juggling game is thus made less onerous for the teacher because the inclusion of this new material makes the entire course a fresh experience for the students and highlights dramatically one of the prime goals of the undergraduate course-- the idea that American literature, at least, has had as a primary concern the search for an identity. Obviously the search takes many different forms, but black literature works especially well on an undergraduate level because it demonstrates so vividly the burden of the search and the impediments inherent in the American Dream to the discovery of an identity. For, in one sense, black literature is the most American of all writing because the black American was created here-- socially, economically, and culturally.

This not to suggest that the question of a black aesthetic be blurred for the student by the integration of black literature into a predominately white syllabus. Indeed, another of the goals of the course may be the dislodging of the students' assumption that the melting pot mystique is still operative or even viable.

For that reason, references to Corrothers, Dunbar, and Chesnutt can add a dimension of relevance to the section of the syllabus dealing with the white regionalists by suggesting that the drive to articulate folk culture is a basic one and not at all an academic exercise. Similarly, confronting students with the Washington-DuBois debates-- especially the forceful and lamentably still appropriate essays of the latter-- demonstrates as little else can that questions of community and identity are of vital importance to any writer. Somehow the vitality and relevance of the black debate make James' concern of the same period with the American European conflict less esoteric and more accessible. Too, contrasting the Babbittry of the post-World War I period with the phenomenon of the Harlem Renaissance serves to jolt the students and make them more aware of the spectacle of the reaction of all the "sad young men" of the decade.

Obviously, the foregoing are only a few of the possibilities. Depending upon the individual professor's goals, the wealth of black literature available to him make

a number of approaches possible-- and there is no reason why the course must be chronologically structured, given the kind of audience he may be teaching. It is, in fact, the response of the audience, the students, which shows clearly the benefit of the broader-than-mainstream coverage. For some students, the American literature survey may be the first exposure they have had to the existence of black writing and many of them become sensitized to writing in a way they have not experienced before. Perhaps because of their naivete, they are freed from the question of whether they are unable to understand black literature because they are white; for the most part, they find the literature accessible and pertinant in a way that the traditional canon of literature can not be because it is suffocated with an academic sacrosanctity.

The teachers themselves, however, are not as naive. They are well aware of the on-going debate about white criticism of black literature and for those who are white the debate can become very personal. One can decide that literature is literature and teaching but that doesn't obviate the sense of unsurety about the material. In addition, most teachers of American literature emerged from their respective graduate programs too soon to be affected by the respectibility of black studies programs. They went through courses with titles like "Major American Writers" or seminars in Hawthorne and Melville or forums on the modern American novel, but graduated with little or no academic exposure to black literature. And so the concerned teacher must educate himself, often with no guidance, in order to meet the demands of his own philosophical decision.

Lately the teacher's resources are increasing; there are in the works several research projects dealing with precisely the problem of integrating black literature into and American literature survey syllabus and suggesting class-room proved techniques for "cramming it all in." Publishing house interest in such projects is an acknowledgement of the need for practical solutions and attendance at forums like today's is an indication of the relevance of such concerns.